Pacific Fighters

The latest in the award-winning line of *Il-2 Sturmovik* WW 2 combat flight simulations, *Pacific Fighters* takes the action eastwards to the Pacific Theatre, allowing virtual pilots to fly for Japan, the United States, Great Britain or Australia in that momentous conflict.

Installation of the sim allows two different options — either 'stand-alone' or on top of a previous *Il-2 Forgotten Battles* and *Aces Expansion Pack* installation. With FB+AEP+PF combined, there are something like over 180 highly-detailed WW2 warbirds to fly and this allows you to fly *Pacific Fighters* aircraft on the Eastern and Western Front or *vice versa*, so, as well as creating historical battles (Beaufighter ops against Channel shipping, for example), you can also create fictional what-ifs (Fw190 vs Corsair anybody?).

The new aircraft that are included in *Pacific Fighters* are an interesting bunch. As well as the standard US Navy (and FAA) rides like the Wildcat, Hellcat and Corsair, there are also rarely-simulated aircraft like the A-20G Havoc, Beaufighter 21 and even the Rufe, a floatplane version of the Zero. Strangely left out of flyable aircraft are carrier-borne torpedo bombers like the Devastator, Avenger or Kate. This means you are left with dive bombers like the Val and Dauntless — not a major failing but, considering the Il-2 was torpedo-capable in FB, it is hoped this can be remedied in a future patch.

Graphically wise, *Pacific Fighters* is stunning — but you will need the latest graphics cards to render the incredible waves and tropical water. The aircraft themselves are up to the usual standards and nice touches, such as shot-up panels revealing a life-raft in the Wildcat, and downed pilots floating in their lifejackets, are evident everywhere.

What really sets this sim apart, however, are its meticulously-detailed carrier operations. If you are tired of sight-seeing in *FS2002/4* or have landings down to a fine art in *Il-2FB*, try putting a stricken aircraft down on the deck of a bucking, rolling postage stamp in the middle of the ocean. Accidents on landing come extremely close to the contemporary footage of carrier mishaps, with bent props, broken landing gear and wrecked wings the result, even if you manage to get it down on the deck.

Taking off can also be quite hairy, especially if you are all loaded up with rockets and bombs and the carrier is not going that fast into wind — and reminds you of the limitations of carrier warfare.

Another new feature is the possibility of 128-player dog-fights (currently the maxium number of players is 32 in FB) online, for those lucky enough to have broadband, which should make for some exhilarating aerial battles.

However, there are some minor niggles. In FB+AEP the flight models are extremely realistic, with all sorts of vices to catch the unwary, like the Fw190's vicious high-speed stall and the unrecoverable spin of the Airacobra. Yet in *Pacific Fighters*, this seems toned down. In real-life the Corsair was known as the 'Ensign Eliminator' yet in *Pacific Fighters* it can be flung around the sky in abandon. There are some annoying bugs, like the suicidal Beaufighters that repeatedly crash into the Owen Stanley mountains on the New Guinea map because the AI doesn't fly high enough, or the allocation of P-400s and P-39s to the USMC at Guadalcanal — neither of which they flew.

More damning are the undefined keys (coupled with the lacklustre manual) which means that, unless you have read the *Readme* thoroughly, you will not know that aircraft on the carrier are equipped with chocks (in reality tie-downs) and will wonder why your aircraft will not go anywhere with 100% power.

Finally, the scarcity of single missions to play, means a large reliance is placed on the dynamic campaign. This is all well and good but the designers have opted for realism over fun, and the result is that these large maps can take forever to cross, even at x8 speed rate. There is a time skip function but bizarrely it shows a black screen with a timer and does not take you immediately to where the action is. For gamers or pilots with limited time each evening, this is a serious shortcoming.

In short, this is a fitting finale to the *Il-2* series (and patches will still support this series) but with some minor quibbles. It means that with FB+AEP+PF you now have the most comprehensive and realistic simulation of WW2 aviation on the PC. However, all eyes all now on Oleg Maddox's next project, with a new game engine, 'Battle of Britain' which will be out in 2005, and which will promise to do to the most famous air battle in history what *Il-2 Sturmovik* did to some of the least known *Forgotten Battles*.

Tim Robinson

System Requirements

Windows XP/2000/Me/98
1Ghz+ PC
64MB 3D Video card
512MB RAM
Approx 1.1Gb disk space
USB Joystick
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